

Thai security bares Soviet spy network

by Sophie Tanapura

On Aug. 20 and 25, Thai security officials arrested first Geoffrey Higginson, a British national, then Tomas Benes, a naturalized West German of Czech origin, for spying on the Russians. In addition, immigration officials have refused to renew the work permits of two Soviet "businessmen," the managers of Aeroflot airlines, and Thaisos Shipping Co., Ltd., a Soviet-Thai-Singaporean joint venture, on charges of suspected espionage.

According to his own testimony, the 33-year-old Higginson began his career working for the Russians two years ago when he was picked up by Andrei Korontin, a Soviet embassy third secretary. Numerous rendezvous occurred; then Higginson was sent to Moscow for a five-day espionage training program. The Russians ordered him to either enter the British army to spy on military installations in NATO, or try to land a job at a British embassy in Bangkok or Hong Kong. Though Higginson did not succeed in either of those efforts, the Soviets had him collect information on Chinese and U.S. military installations in the region.

"The Soviets want to know where the site of the Thai-U.S. war reserve stockpile will be," said one analyst, "and whether it will hold missiles that could destroy the Soviet naval base at Cam Ranh Bay" in Vietnam. Thai officials are especially concerned about Soviet intelligence passed to the Vietnamese about Thai military installations on the border with Kampuchea. Thai officials, who said Higginson worked primarily for money, found a letter on him when arrested addressed to a "Mr. Yuri," asking whether he wanted additional documents. The decision to arrest him apparently occurred when Higginson tried to recruit Thai nationals into his spy network.

Benes, now 37, had earlier been expelled from Thailand as *persona non grata* for shipping Thai prostitutes to West Germany under the guise of a tourism company. He illegally re-entered Thailand recently. According to intelligence sources, Benes has been working for the KGB since 1970. Within two weeks of their arrests, both Higginson and Benes were expelled from Thailand.

Neither of these agents was particularly well placed or important. What is significant is that they were exposed at all. The government of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond has been working to improve relations with Moscow. In October, Army Commander-in-Chief Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh will be the first Thai army chief to visit Russia. Prime

Minister Prem has said he will make the same trip some time next year. Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila has already led a Thai business delegation to Russia this past April, and the meeting was soon after reciprocated by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's mission to Thailand in June.

Soon after the initial leaks on the spy cases to the press, a clampdown was placed on all news about the affair, especially in the Thai-language press. Prem has since reaffirmed both his and General Chaovalit's intention to visit Moscow. In defense of the Soviets, Prem noted that espionage is nothing unusual in international relations, since every country tries to gather intelligence in one way or another. Reports are circulating that Prem believes he can use the affair to improve his bargaining position when he goes to Moscow.

The U.N. connection

One week after Higginson was expelled, the English-language Thai daily *The Nation* ran a full-page exposé of Soviet intelligence operations, based on interviews with anonymous Thai security officials.

They estimate that, of 87 Soviet officials based in Thailand, about half are agents of either the KGB or the military GRU. Thai officials have known for years that the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) serves as a training ground for newly recruited KGB and GRU agents. Moscow has been pressuring U.N. officials to increase the number of its delegates, and Russia has even offered to pay the extra expenses of an increase, according to Thai experts.

The Nation reported, "These Soviet intelligence officials also hardly carry out the jobs related to their official positions at ESCAP but instead spend much time outdoors on their covert missions, security officials say. Soviet intelligence officials are also fond of spotting and recruiting senior U.N. diplomats serving their terms at ESCAP because these foreign diplomats could be transferred to more important posts with access to classified documents afterwards." *The Nation* continued, "After having spotted potentially useful personalities, Soviet intelligence officials continue in keeping contact with them in what is called the stage of cultivation. In this stage, the Soviet agents stress personal friendship and seek to convince their prospective tools of policy advocated or favorable to Moscow."

The day Higginson was expelled, Soviet Ambassador to Thailand Valentin Kasatkin happened to be giving a press conference to announce his transfer to another capital. In response to the charges of espionage, he declared: "It's kind of a fairy tale or fairy tales which do not deserve comment, because they're completely groundless and baseless. . . . The Soviet Union does not have any ill intention either toward Thailand or the Thai people." He also reported that "high-ranking Soviet experts" would come to Bangkok very soon to "try to outline the fields and spheres of possible economic and trade cooperation between our two countries."